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C O N F I D E N T I A L LILONGWE 000229

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STATE FOR AF/S KAMANA MATHUR  
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SUBJECT: ISLAM IN MALAWI - PAST AND PRESENT

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Classified By: Ambassador Alan Eastham for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

[1](#)1. (SBU) Summary: Muslims make up over twenty percent of Malawi's population, and are actively engaged in political, economic, and civil society. After a perceived golden age for Muslims under former president and fellow Muslim Bakili Muluzi, many now complain of marginalization under the rule of President Bingu wa Mutharika, a staunch Roman Catholic. Muslims, by no means a homogenous group and often divided along African-Asian racial lines, often see themselves as being targeted for discrimination by a government that views them as natural political opponents. However, Muslims in Malawi still remain fairly insulated internationally, and are moderate in their social and political views. Malawi's Muslim views on Americans, and to a lesser extent America, remain in relatively good standing and have been enhanced by recent programming and outreach to the Muslim community. End Summary.

The Historical Context: Imported Islam  
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[1](#)2. (U) Islam was first introduced to Malawi in the late 1500s by Arab Muslim traders seeking new economic markets and slave routes via Lake Malawi. Contact with these first Muslim migrants led to the conversion to Islam of many indigenous people living along the lakeshore and the Shire River. Moreover, Islam married well with the cultural practices of certain ethnic groups such as the Yao. Western missionaries, motivated to spread Christianity and combat the slave trade, began their activities in Malawi in the 1860s. The perception among the indigenous Malawians was that children were required to convert to Christianity before enrolling in mission schools. Thus many Malawians, including those from the numerous Chewa tribe, adopted Christianity. Many Yao members, fearing that their children would be forced to become Christian, kept their children away from mission schools. Many black Muslims are still reluctant to send their children to government schools for fear of forced conversion. The legacy of inequitable access to education and, by extension, economic opportunities, has led to black Muslim communities having the highest illiteracy rates in the country.

[1](#)3. (U) The Asian Muslim population, primarily from modern-day Pakistan and India, came with the British colonial administration in the first half of the twentieth century. With their international connections and superior access to

academic and economic opportunities, Asian Muslims quickly gained an important place in the Malawian business sector. Though Asians were heavily discriminated against under President Banda's regime, including their forced relocation to Malawi's four major cities in 1974, Asian Muslims managed to prosper economically while building their own independent social networks. Today, many Asian Muslims are among Malawi's most wealthy individuals.

#### Islamic Sects in Malawi

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¶4. (SBU) Most Muslims in Malawi are Sunni. The two main "tariqa" ("brotherhoods" or "orders"), both of which find their roots in Sufism, are Qadriyah (or Quadriya) and Sukuti (or earlier on Shadhiliyah). Though both orders came to Malawi from Zanzibar via Lake Malawi, Qadriyah was dominant in the early days. In the 1930's, a reform movement began (Shadhiliyah first, then later Sukuti) that preached against many of the forms of religious rites of the Qadriyah. The reformists stressed the importance of Arabic literacy for religion and English literacy f/r secular communication, while denouncing Qadriyah practices such as dancing and carrying flags and banners at funerals as being un-islamic and contrary to scripture.

¶5. (SBU) By the 1960s, Asian Muslims in Malawi began funding the construction of mosques and the establishment of schools. Their support went to the Sukuti branch. Today, the newer, more impressive mosques and schools are Sukuti, and the smaller, poorer ones are Qadriyah. Those Muslim Malawians who have contact with Muslims in other countries (or who have been educated outside the country) are generally Sukuti. The Qadriyah often resent the Sukuti's superior access to resources and education, a sentiment that extends to organizations like the Muslim Association of Malawi (MAM), which is seen as a "Sukuti organization." The very small Shiite presence in Malawi is primarily composed of foreigners.

#### Muslims in Politics

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¶6. (SBU) The end of Hastings Banda's "life-presidency" in 1994, and the election of the United Democratic Front's (UDF) Bakili Muluzi, signaled a new day for Malawi's Muslim community. Muluzi, a Muslim from Southern Malawi, strongly supported Muslims at home, building a number of Mosques and religious schools, while forging strong ties with other Muslim countries abroad, including Libya, Morocco, and Egypt. Locally, Muslims formed the backbone of the UDF party, helping Muluzi win a second term in 1999. Malawi, for the first time in history, began to recognize Muslim holidays while political opponents decried the "Islamization of Malawi." Upon Muluzi's urging Muslims again supported the UDF candidate, Mutharika, and his running-mate, the Muslim Cassim Chilumpha, in the 2004 elections.

¶7. (C) However, most Muslims later became disillusioned with Mutharika, as the President targeted Muluzi with a corruption probe and pulled out of the UDF to start his own party in ¶2005. Mutharika, attempting to split the Muslim population, announced that his government refused to recognize the Muslim Association of Malawi, but would instead work with the Quadriya Muslim Association--widely seen as little more than a government-stooge group. Muslims saw more and more events--such as the arrest of VP Chilumpha on treason charges, the banning of vendors (most of whom were believed to be Muslim) from the streets, and the dismissal of a number of Muslim civil servants--as targeted government discrimination against Muslims. One Muslim MP recently told an Embassy official that, "Muslims feel that (Mutharika's) government is sidelining them...they have recal,ed all Muslim Ambassadors, and removed all but one Muslim Principal Secretary from the Ministries." He went on to say that some

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Muslims hope a return to power by Muluzi, who appears ready to run for President again in 2009, will restore their

standing in the country.

#### The Xenophobia Factor

18. (C) There exists a high level of resentment on the part of the "indigenous", or Black, Muslims towards the Asian Muslim community, who are seen as foreigners even though many were born and raised in Malawi. Many Black Muslims, much as their Christian countrymen, view Asian Malawians as unscrupulous, predatory businessmen who rob "native" Malawians of their economic opportunities and fraudulently run fake charities in order to import goods duty free. In truth, while some graft might take place, Asian Malawians spend a great deal of resources supporting various charities in Muslim areas throughout Malawi. Yet due to their cultural, financial, and racial differences Asians run in completely separate social and economic circles from Black Muslims, which breeds resentment and jealousy. Muslim politicians, however, know that Asian Muslims control the wealth of financial resources available for both social and political pursuits, and thus try to maintain close ties to the Asian community. For their part, Asian Muslims remember the discrimination they faced under President Banda's regime, and seek close ties with Malawi's political elite in order to protect their own interests.

#### Malawi's Muslims and Americans

19. (SBU) The June 2003 expulsion of five non-Malawian (two Sudanese, two Turkish, and one Saudi) Muslims suspected of ties to Al-Qaida (AKA the "Malawi Five"), which the press characterized and most Malawians believe to have been a USG initiative, severely damaged the Muslim-American relations in Malawi. However, in large part due to mission outreach to the Muslim community--including Iftar dinners at the CMR, regular appearances by Embassy spokespeople on Radio Islam, and the 2006 visit to Malawi of Imam Darryl Wainwright--the Malawi Five incident has largely been left in the past. "Muslims here are beginning to realize that they don't have to be afraid of America, and that while they might disagree with a few people, they shouldn't generalize into thinking that all Americans are one way or the other," a prominent Muslim recently said privately. While Malawi's Muslims might disagree with American policy, they are generally not anti-American and appreciate USG efforts to assist in Malawi's development.

#### Comment

110. (C) Most of Malawi's roughly 2.5 million Muslims, like their Christian countrymen, are subsistence farmers focused on providing for their families and overcoming pervasive poverty. Those interested in political affairs tend to focus almost exclusively on internal domestic politics, and the treatment of Muslims by Bingu wa Mutharika's government. While this "marginalization" can hardly be considered any more than that, with no physical intimidation or widespread repression taking place, the perception among Muslims is that they are indeed discriminated against by Mutharika's government. Mutharika, who sees Muslims as firm Muluzi supporters, has done little to dispel this notion and can count on most of those from the traditional Muslim regions--Mangochi, Machinga and Balaka--to support Muluzi in the 2009 Presidential elections. However, the Asian Muslim community could split its very important financial support between Mutharika--seen as a significantly better manager of the economy than his predecessor--and Muluzi for financial reasons. Regardless, with Black Muslims making up twenty percent of the population and Asian Muslims controlling a vast amount of Malawi's economic resources, the Muslim community is sure to play an important role the next time Malawians head to the polls.

111. (SBU) Post thanks the Department for its support of Muslim outreach programs, including IV and Speaker

programs, which have been extremely effective at getting out USG messages to the local Muslim community. Post views these programs as central to the USG's continued efforts to reach out to and engage Malawian Muslims, and requests continued support for these programs.

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